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A Joint Fire Science Program Project

Agency-Stakeholder Trust in Communities at Risk of Wildfire in Australia, Canada, and the United States

Project summary:

A team of social scientists from Australia, Canada, and the United States is utilizing its collective research to examine factors that influence stakeholder trust of fire and land management agencies in planning and decision-making. Their research shows these ideas are closely linked; attention to both effective planning and trustworthy relationships is likely to result in well supported programs. This project takes a collaborative, multi-party approach to assess trust factors across settings. One outcome will be a planning guide to assist agency managers and stakeholders. An innovative aspect of this project is an evaluation process that incorporates researchers, agency personnel, and stakeholders in a workshop setting in each country to ground-truth key components. The workshops, conducted in the Fall of 2012, also provided for site visits to affected landscapes in each setting. These activities are providing an atmosphere in which all participants learn from one another. Subsequent steps will include the research team making adjustments to planning materials, re-engaging with participants, and contributions to successful fire management programs.

The following is a brief summary of discussion points from the workshops held this Fall. The research team believes the workshops were universally successful. In each case, 12-15 highly experienced resource professionals met with the team in the host country. There was much agreement, as well as subtle differences. The primary focus here is to share highlights from these conversations about building trustworthy relationships as they may be interesting to those having similar conversations in other communities. It is also to inform others that this research is in-progress and more formal documents will emerge as the team continues its work.

Research team:

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Sarah McCaffrey, U.S. Forest Service, Northern Research Station, United States
Tara McGee, University of Alberta, Canada
Bonita McFarlane & Amy Christianson, NR Canada, Alberta, Canada
Allan Curtis & Emily Sharp, Charles Sturt University, NSW, Australia

Workshops, Fall 2012:

Bend, Oregon (USA)—September 19
Kananaskis, Alberta (Canada)—September 25
Wangaratta, Victoria (Australia)—October 31

General Discussion of Trust/Trust building—Points of Shared Agreement

- Most participants were enthusiastic that the topic of trust is being discussed as a priority. Many appreciated that trustworthy qualities and actions were being formally acknowledged. Some had not really considered the topic by itself; this helped them realize how they had personally experienced or practiced these ideas over time.
- Identifying three trustworthy qualities—*competence, fairness and equity, shared values*—resonated for most people. Some advocated for adding a fourth—*accountability* (doing what you say you will do... or building up credibility over time through promise-keeping).
- Building relationships with individuals is the foundation for being judged as competent, fair, and sharing values.
- Agencies and personnel must make a deliberate decision that collaboration is part of how they will conduct business.
- Field personnel must have broad agency support for collaborative planning to be successful.
- Staff turnover is a problem—trust-building usually requires that people stay in one place long enough to build relationships. This can be compensated for when the value of trust becomes embedded in the culture of the organization.
- Building and maintaining trust happens through all phases of fire (pre, during, post). The idea is that trust accrues as it carries over from one activity to another. For example, interactions during the planning stage can help build trust for later phases.
- Trust building is a long-term endeavor that needs to be able to account for (withstand) errors/failures.
- Recognize the usefulness and importance of building trust with small groups rather than attempting to take on an entire community.
- The idea of healthy skepticism (parties trusting each other *enough* to begin to work together) seems to be a useful concept. We can use whatever trust has been developed to get people to cross over the line and deal with risks.
- Recognize the importance of mutual learning among multiple parties—across agencies and stakeholders. Find places on-the-ground to accomplish this (field visits, demonstrations sites, neighborhoods).
- Transparent communication and planning processes are essential to building trust.
- Attention to expectations, roles, and responsibilities are key in these settings.
- Trust requires good communication and interpersonal skills. Sometimes it's about having the right person for a specific task or in a particular position.
- Local agency personnel are the key to building trust in communities.
- Capacity within agencies to commit to and support these ideas (collaboration, trust building, outreach activities) will be an issue in some places.
- Many recognized the fragility of trust... and that longer-term relationships can help withstand miss-steps.
- Trust is an adaptive process, not a linear one. There has to be tolerance for mistakes/failures from upper agency management.
- Success often comes from having local champions in the community support your efforts.
- Engage people early—long before legislated requirements.

- Shifting populations (urban people moving to rural areas) makes trust-building a challenging proposition.
- If you work for an agency and live in the community, then you are engaged with stakeholders on a variety of levels and situations. All of this contributes to how well you are trusted.
- A planning guide and documents like it are highly relevant for resource agencies.
- Also, a training module (e.g., workshops, seminars, facilitated discussions) to set up or accompany the guide may be useful
- Different communities have different levels of knowledge/expertise. Different types of engagement may be required.

Country-Specific Comments

- Participants noted that agency structure and fire management responsibilities vary across settings. Federal agencies are often in the lead in the U.S., while provincial/state agencies are dominant in Canada and Australia.
- Because of laws and regulations, agencies in the U.S. have generally had a longer (and different) history of interaction with citizens about fire mitigation.
- Canada and Australia are similar in that collaboration is typically over small projects or single-activities. In the U.S.—again because of legislated initiatives—there is more frequent agency involvement in large collaboratives where formal planning processes around landscape level projects are necessary.
- In Canada, closure of regional offices is an impediment to trust building.
- Use of the term “stakeholders”—in the U.S. this could mean anyone, in Canada it’s generally local government, and in Australia stakeholders may be industry or environmental groups.
- In Canada, “manager” implies an office position—not the field people who are dealing with stakeholders and communities. Suggest changing “manager” to “agency field level” or “practitioner” or “project manager” or “field personnel.”
- The term WUI (wildland-urban interface) was not familiar to some Australians.
- In Australia the CFA (Country Fire Authority) volunteers are usually the ones generating trust on the ground. The CFA tentacles are huge and their local presence is large. Most members would see their job as putting out fires, not engagement, but that’s where the trust comes from.

Noteworthy quotes (random order)

“We have to make a deliberate decision to collaborate... trust-building is essential. And I’ve never been to a workshop in the Forest Service about building trust.” (agency manager—U.S.)

“Planning and trust-building absolutely have to happen together. If there is a disconnect between the expectation and what people see, trust erodes.” (community group member—U.S.)

“Letting go of ego requires agency staff to say I made a mistake... they have to have enough confidence to say that.” (community member—U.S.)

“If we ask what are the things we should address in this watershed, the agency has to be committed to doing something with the answers.” (agency field specialist—U.S.)

“Skepticism is born of historical baggage and an unwillingness to step back from your ego and acknowledge there are often more answers, not just one.” (NGO member—U.S.)

“Make conversation occur on the ground; it changes the tone of the conversation... it becomes about the place, not the product.” (community group member—U.S.)

“When people commit hours of their time, they need to trust that something is going to come of it.” (agency manager—U.S.)

“Trust is not earned until you take action that shows you weighed and considered what people had to say.” (agency manager—U.S.)

“I have this hunch that scaling up from small projects to bigger ones—people will be watching to see if the process was legitimate. Eventually they will develop enough trust that even a ‘no’ down the line could be okay, but earlier in the process the ‘no’ could be disastrous.” (NGO member—U.S.)

“I’ve always thought about relationship-building, trust-building, working collaboratively as a way of doing business... essentially all of this is a way of getting things done.” (agency manager—U.S.)

“Since the centralization of government, we’ve lost our connection with communities. Everyone used to trust the local ranger; we don’t have that as much anymore.” (agency representative—Canada)

“I’m not looking for tools to carry out fuels reduction. I’m looking for tools to build better trust, to get the process moving.” (community group member—Canada)

“For so long government has not been transparent, but we are dealing with an increasingly educated population and they are starting to demand transparency.” (agency representative—Canada)

“We’re not the best communicators. If we were we’d be in a different position. We’re out in the woods. Now we’re finding there are a lot of other people in the woods too. The way business is being done has changed significantly.” (agency representative—Canada)

“Toxic statements from the public can wrench a program hard when we haven’t done the job properly. The public no longer accepts the ‘trust us, we are the experts’ line.” (agency representative—Canada)

“When stakeholders do not participate, this should not be viewed as disinterest. Just providing opportunities helps build trust. Managers should continue to reach out... be careful to take nothing for granted.” (community member—Canada)

“I don’t think trust comes accidentally. You have to plan to develop trust... there’s a process involved.” (agency representative—Canada)

“I don’t go into a community planning to treat 50 hectares. I do one hectare and that becomes your demonstration forest. You invite people in and say ‘this is what your forest will look like.’ This is a showcase for people to come in and have a look at it and say if we are taking too much or too little.” (agency representative—Canada)

“We run into quagmires when we think everyone is in the same place, and we go ahead with things where we would be better off going slower.” (agency representative—Canada)

“You have to be accountable, be transparent. If this doesn’t happen, then I know you don’t share my values.” (community member—Canada)

“There’s a need to follow up after projects for feedback. Communications and relationships do not stop when the project ends. You don’t follow up just for concerns, but also for successes. (agency personnel—U.S. and Canada)

“In order to build trust, the emphasis from the beginning should be for agency managers to listen first, then address specific concerns. Often, all people need is to be heard and to have their fears and concerns addressed.” (agency scientist—Canada)

“Trust is often accidental... sometimes we do things that aren’t designed to build trust, but they do build trust. Trust is money in the bank that is built up in ‘peacetime’ and pays dividends in the response and recovery phases.” (agency manager—Australia)

“We should never assume that trustworthy relations is the starting place... that a community will trust us just because we have shown up. (agency manager—Australia)

“We need to acknowledge the things that organizations are doing well to build trust right now.” (agency manager—Australia)

“It may be useful to distinguish between interagency coordination/collaboration and building personal trust within communities.” (agency manager—Australia).

“Trust is like respect in that it is actually earned. Never say something unless you can actually do it.” (agency manager—Australia)

“Trust has to be built before fires arrive... proven through the fire event with actions that are consistent, responsible, and in the community’s best interest... and reinforced after the fire by assistance and support to communities.” (agency manager—Australia)

“Recognize the importance of mutual learning. Make conversations occur on the ground with examples and demonstrations. Take action that shows interests have been addressed, or at least considered during implementation. The planning stage might help build trust but implementation is what keeps trust (do what you said you would do).” (agency manager—Australia)

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